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WINNING AT RUSSIAN ROULETTE

Later in that second session with the marriage counselor, I had the kind of breakthrough that used to occur in Hollywood movies about psychoanalysis. Also a breakdown, of a kind that I think I never had again in several later years of analysis.

As an analogy to something else I was discussing with him, I recalled something I don't think I had ever told anyone about before. My mother, wanting me to be somewhat well-rounded and not just a pianist or student, had enrolled me in tennis lessons with a well-known coach in Hamtramck, the Polish enclave in Detroit. Her students were mostly poor Polish kids who didn't have any money for lessons, and she worked them very hard. Me, too. I was supposed to add hours of tennis practice to my hours of piano practice, though only in the summer, of course, when there was time for both.

And although most of the kids who were learning along with me went on to become national champions in indoor competition, which was her specialty, I was as good as they were in our starting stages. When we would rally for practice, sometimes for a long time, my shots were as good as theirs, and I was as likely to win a point or a game as they were when we started playing sets.

But when we neared the climax of a set, or a match, a peculiar thing happened. My game collapsed. I began uncontrollably hitting balls into the net or even over the fence. In effect, I threw the match, nearly every time; and especially if my mother was watching. Nothing like that ever happened to me when I was competing scholastically or on the piano, or playing a recital. It came into my head as I was talking to the counsellor because it was analogous to another phenomenon I had been discussing with him, both of these very uncharacteristic of my experience. Both examples of an almost deliberate, yet out-of-control failure.

And in the case of the tennis, I could think of an explanation. (I don't think I had consciously thought of this before, though I might have). In the end, my mother didn't really care whether I was an outstanding tennis player, or even a tennis player at all. Nothing mattered to her but the piano; and secondarily, excelling in school. So it didn't really matter if it turned out that tennis just wasn't my thing.

On the other hand, if I had tried my hardest to win, with some evidence of talent, and then had lost anyway: that she wouldn't like or respect, that would be dangerous. Almost as bad, if I turned out to have real talent and was successful competitively, it was just possible that I would end up having to work almost as hard at tennis as at the piano. There was no question of tennis supplanting the piano, just a bare possibility that if I were too

good at it, it might be added, as a second vocation.

So it just wasn't worth it, to succeed competitively in tennis or even to make a respectable try at it. At best I couldn't win much (the only place it counted, in my mother's eyes) but I could be humiliated, or newly obligated. In the case of piano, I couldn't avoid taking the chance of humiliating, crushing failure, annihilation, loss of my relationship with my mother, because I would suffer the same fate if I didn't compete. I couldn't afford either to lose or to evade the contest in that arena.

But I wasn't compelled to take on tennis as well, on the same basis. I could evade the opposed risks either of being second-rate in tennis, or of being first-rate.

Before I got close to losing (or winning) a hard-fought match, I would "lose it," blow it, demonstrate a spectacular inaptitude for competition tennis. And indeed, it didn't bother Mother much. I drifted out of Mrs. Hoxie's discipline (in a way I could never do with Miss Mannebach). (I did make the varsity tennis team at Cranbrook as the only sophomore listed, but as the eleventh man on a ten-man team, a substitute who rarely played. Before my junior year I broke my leg in the accident).

My interpretation to the counsellor was that instead of giving my all in tennis in order to be a success and please my mother, and

possibly fail, I would just throw the match, blow it, fall apart, demonstrate incurable incompetence. Because tennis, unlike the piano, was an arena where I didn't have to be judged and I preferred not to be judged (by myself or a stranger) and fail. Get it over with, in a way that wasn't available to me in piano, where I couldn't quit.

My interpretation might or might not have been valid, and likewise the analogy I saw (with an aspect of my relations with women). But what I experienced as I began to apply it in the case of my relations with women was real, all right. I suddenly, unforeseeably, began to sob, with an intensity and an abruptness that was like a scream. Nothing like this had ever happened before and it's happened only a handful of times since.

For the first time in my life, at 27, it came into my awareness that I had been continuously afraid of losing my mother's love throughout my childhood. I had lived with the fear--or the knowledge--that I would lose her interest in me and her love, which would be like death, if I had quit the piano or finally failed as a pianist.

Talking about the fact that I could afford to fail at tennis without losing my mother's love brought into sight at the same moment the other side of that coin, that that was not true, it had never been true, for playing the piano.

I realized suddenly for the first time, in that office at the Institute of Family Relations, that I had been working for my mother, all those long hours of practicing, child labor beyond the reach of any protective laws, working to maintain her interest in me and her love. In fear of death, death of her love and our relationship and a meaningful life for me.

But that labor was the least of it. I knew how to practice, how to work hard at it, how to take apart and polish and repeat, how never to be satisfied, how to experiment; I could be sure of being good enough at practicing. But for Miss Mannebach the practicing was all aimed at public performances or at recitals where the competition was with musical standards in the ears and minds of oneself, teacher, mother, audience. That was her advertising, how she got new students.

Every time you stepped out on that stage before the public, you could fail decisively, irrevocably. Oh, a single mistake, even a bad performance could be recovered from, could be redeemed later, if you were sufficiently self-reproachful and redoubled your efforts to do it right.

But there was always a risk that you would reveal yourself in a performance to be not a promising pianist, after all, not really a talent worth investing a teacher's efforts or a mother's

attention and hopes and love on. To inspire that conclusion in my mother would be sudden death.

Those were the stakes in every major recital. That danger couldn't be avoided just by willpower and diligence and effort, which were enough to keep hopes alive indefinitely in the course of practicing. You could fail definitively in a recital, and you couldn't indefinitely avoid the recitals. You had to take the chance, the gamble with death. It was a forced game of Russian Roulette.

I saw all that later when I reflected on my crying jag at the counselling session. But in that session, I simply became conscious belatedly that I had worked very hard for a decade and more to earn a mother's love, and yet at frequent peril of losing it.

I don't think I felt sorry for myself, then or later. (Or maybe I'm wrong. Maybe what I felt was sorrow, for the boy I had been) I was aware even then how much worse it could have been for me, even without moving my condition to the ghetto or Calcutta. I could have been one of the many for whom a mother's love wasn't available on any terms. Or I could have failed to earn it.

I could have lacked the minimum talent needed to arouse her hopes. That was the situation I saw my sister in. She was given

some lessons, but she was a rotten pianist, no talent at all, so she was let off with no questions asked. She certainly wasn't unloved, but I took it for granted that she didn't have a chance at capturing the attention I got from Mother. (But maybe my feeling of having the inside track, being the favored one, was largely a way of not noticing that I was working an awful lot harder than Gloria for what I was getting. I don't even know what she did with all the time I was practicing and she wasn't).

I had earned the love, I had been loved, and I knew it. So why was I suddenly crying so hard? It might seem illusionary to try to recapture feelings from a moment 37 years ago, which would have been hard to articulate at the time, but it actually seems to me that I can identify some of them.

Fatigue and relief and painful awareness. Belated awareness of a long long strain and suppressed fear. Relief from no longer carrying a very heavy burden, and relief from the fear that it might break me; relief and horror at a sudden awareness of the dangers I had survived, the risks I had run so often for so long.¹

It was as if mists cleared and you found that you had been walking near a precipice, or at the end of a long drive in the mountains you discovered that your brakes or steering had been near to failing. A letting into awareness of a long-endured and long-

repressed sense of danger and dread, and of strain and fatigue. And finally, the sense that you should have known this all before, that in some way you did know it, but you allowed yourself to be fooled and blinded, you fooled yourself. Shame.

A lot to cry about. The crying was like panting at the end of a marathon. I cried for the rest of the hour, hardly able to gasp out the thoughts that were coming to me. When Carol took my place with the counsellor at the end of the hour, I went outside and walked around and around the block for the next hour, still sobbing.

END NOTES

1. As I write this, I recall my extreme hostile reaction to the movie The Deer Hunter because of its theme of Russian Roulette, either forced or as a gambling sport. In the movie, the Viet Cong force their captives, on pain of death, to play Russian Roulette with each other. Later, Saigon civilians are shown betting on Americans and Vietnamese who play Russian Roulette in front of them.

I felt very emotionally that both of these scenes--which had no basis in Vietnamese reality, either in Communist prisons or gambling habits in Vietnam (the plot had been lifted from a purely fictional script set in the Bahamas)--were vicious slanders on Vietnamese character. No real culture in the world, I pointed out furiously, actually imposed or enjoyed literal Russian Roulette as either a sport, a gamble or a torture. The (conservative, pro-war) moviemakers were slanderously presenting Vietnamese, both South and North, as excited by the possibility or spectacle of seeing someone blow his brains out in front of them, or risk it.

The thought I have just had is that perhaps the idea of being forced to play Russian Roulette and even doing it as a performance for an audience, some of whom were betting on you, was not all that new to me. Interesting that my reaction to it when I saw the film was that it was one of the worst charges you could make against people, to show them as capable of forcing others to gamble with their lives as torture or for the entertainment of an audience.

Three more instances of the notion of Russian Roulette or ultimate risk-taking in my life. My honors thesis at Harvard was on the subject of "Decisionmaking Under Uncertainty" and my Ph.D. thesis was on "Risk, Ambiguity and Decision." Both of these conceptualized all risk-taking from personal and business decisions to matters of war and peace as forms of gambling behavior.

The Ph.D. thesis included as an appendix a paper I had given at the Econometric Society meetings entitled, "Winning At Russian Roulette." It argued that certain formal decision-criteria could imply that player choosing an "optimal" strategy might, under varying conditions, put one, two, or three or more bullets in the chamber before spinning it. (This was presented ironically, as a tacit critique of the realism of these particular decision-making criteria.)

Finally, in a fiction-writing course as a sophomore at Harvard, as a self-imposed exercise I wrote a series of very short stories, each a page or a page and a half long. One of these was about a man who gets up alone in a single room, grooms himself carefully, and then, as a ritual performed every morning for a

generation before he goes out, spins the chamber on a service revolver, puts it to his head and pulls the trigger. Once more, it fails to go off, and he wraps it up, puts it away and leaves for the day.

The story mentions that he realizes that since the revolver has never fired in thousands of tries, the chances are very strong that the firing pin is broken or the bullets have become inert. But he has never checked this, so the ritual still works for him.

Nothing is said about what this does for him. Does his self-esteem or equilibrium depend on: confirming his invulnerability, his immortality? Winning a bet, being destiny's tot? Redeeming, by a gamble with death, the sins of the day before, or the day to come, or a lifetime, or a particular crime of the past? Assuaging guilt feelings about any of these? Proving undiminished daring, masculinity? Golly, there could be so many good reasons for what he does, no wonder the author didn't pin it down.